

School Culture: Implications to School Improvement and Performance in National Examinations in Kenya

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Abstract

Schools as learning environments are no longer viewed as formal organizations such as factories or manufacturing industries but as learning communities with a system of shared beliefs, values and norms amongst teachers, students and parents aimed at improved performance in national examinations. School culture and the roles played by principals, teachers, students and parents can hence determine the level of performance of each school in national examinations. School-based reforms geared towards improved academic performance in national examinations in secondary schools are likely to succeed if they are meaningfully linked to school culture. In new schools, creating a unique school culture will be an important component of high performance. The culture of a school and inherent characteristics of performing schools can hence be considered as tools for improving schools and performance of students in national examinations. Taking improvement-effective approach, this study focuses on the implication of school culture on performance in Kenya certificate of secondary examinations in order to improve schools and performance in national examinations. The study is therefore limited to principals, teachers, of secondary schools and students and parent in those schools. This study will enable secondary school principals to conduct research in their own schools using the stated instruments across all subjects so as to profile and identify the structure of the culture of their schools in order to work out deliberate plans with teachers in changing schools systemically through creating a strong culture where performance oriented programs are instituted and tested in order to improve p-performance of students. The study also calls upon policy-makers to make it a policy for all teachers to undergo compulsory training in courses on school culture that have to be introduced in order to professionally empower them so that they can grow in it and influence it towards better performance in national examinations. This article after discussing the concept of engineering school culture, it presents improvement-effectiveness approach as the most appropriate to conceptualize school culture in order to maintain and improve performance in Kenya Certificate of Secondary Examination in Kenya. How a culture of a learning community can be measured is discussed. The application and implications of the approach in Kenya is discussed and recommendations and conclusion presented. This study is important for it provides necessary data to improve and maintain high performance in Kenya Certificate of Secondary Examinations in Kenya today.

Keywords: school culture, performance, re-engineering, national examination, learning community

INTRODUCTION

Immediately after gaining independence, the government of Kenya has announced numerous educational policies, published several Sessional Papers and reports, and implemented system-wide educational reforms to improve the quality of education and schooling. It goes without forgetting to note that the quality of education tends to be evaluated in terms of the number of students passing national examinations (Eshiwani, 1993). The sole criterion of educational quality therefore, it appears, is high performance in national examinations. In contemporary Kenya, schooling is taken to be a kind of custom through which learners must perform highly in national examinations if they are to succeed in life. Schools are widely used as “chief means of

sifting each generation into those who get the prize jobs and those who don't” (Dore, 1976).

Notwithstanding the numerous reforms in education sector, the corresponding educational indicators in school such as overall high performance of such educational initiatives have been of limited returns (Otiato, 2009). Taylor and Williams (2001) argued that as accountability through tests has become a threat, school principals need to work on long-term cultural goals in order to strengthen the learning environment so that students are able to perform in national examinations. In addition, the Kenya education system is also placed in the rapidly changing era that is embroiled in performance based management (PBM) that focuses largely on results.

Schools are therefore, expected to perform a wide range of new functions to support these rapid developments at the individual, institutional, community, society, and international levels (Cheng, 2005). Teachers will therefore face different problems, challenges, difficulties and uncertainties (Cheng & Tsui, 1999) that may affect the school quality and hence performance of students. The question to school principals and education policy makers is; *How can performance in Kenya Certificate of Secondary Examination be improved and be maintained?* Purkey and Smith (1983) noted that a student's chance for success in learning cognitive skills is heavily influenced by a school culture because it is the culture that shapes the environment in which the student learns.

In Kenya schools are termed as "performing" or "non-performing" depending on school mean scores in national examinations. When a school runs into survival difficulties and begins to drop in performance, Barth (1990) argued that what needs to be improved about the school is the culture. In fact changing school culture has been identified as a more effective way of improving performance of students in examinations than changing the structure of the way the school operates and functions (Kytte & Bogotch, 2000; Cavanagh & Dellar, 1997a, 1998, and 2003). Studies have also shown that strong culture will improve performance (Brady, 2005; Cavanagh & Waugh, 2004) and that strong cultures can be deliberately created (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1982). Most interestingly, MacNeil, Prater and Busch (2009) alluded that successful or performing school principals comprehend the critical role that the organizational culture plays in developing a performing school.

According to Kilmann, Saxton and Serpa (1985) most of what goes on in schools is guided by the school culture. Focusing on the development of the culture of a school as a learning environment is therefore fundamental for "components of a school culture can support or impede learning," (Makewa, Role & Yegoh 2011 p. 97). Schools therefore need cultural guideposts to achieve high performance in national examinations. It is from this backdrop that this article discusses reengineering school culture in order to improve performance.

Reengineering School Culture

According to Deal (1985) the secret of high performance of students in examinations is found in each school embedded in traditions and symbols that make the school special to students, teachers, administrators, parents, and the community. Deal recommends a school-based approach which encourages the application of the concept of culture to improve performance in national examinations rationally and symbolically. Rationally, daily

programs are well managed and symbolically the school creates and improves its public trust or image. Purkey and Smith (1985) also argue that since each school is unique, it should look at its whole culture: "the organizational looseness of schools and the resulting relative autonomy of teachers in the classroom, indicate that school cohesiveness can be obtained through building staff agreement on and commitment to clearly and commonly identified norms and goals... efforts to change schools have been productive and most enduring when directed towards influencing the entire school culture via a strategy involving collaborative planning, shared decision-making, and collegial work in an atmosphere friendly to experimentation and evaluation," (p. 357).

When teachers are involved in school-wide decision making and or shared planning, it is easy for the school to implement innovations, have changes and install a strong culture necessary for high performance. A change in the culture of a school requires teachers to learn new ways of thinking and behaving, and to acquire new skills and attitudes. For this to happen, they must be meaningfully involved in making decisions concerning these changes so that they own and stand accountable for the outcomes of the changes.

Cunningham and Gresso (1993) note: "... functional cultures must be nourished, nurtured and supported through the correlates of cultural development" (p. 50). Accordingly, for schools to improve and perform highly for many years, they should nurture and build the cultural norms that contribute to growth. Where these cultural norms or elements are present, they should be supported, and where they do not exist they should be built since the degree to which these norms are strong influences performance of students.

The building of these norms "depends equally on teachers' will and commitment, since good leadership alone cannot make them strong; but without such leadership, culture cannot begin to grow or be expected to endure" (Saphier & King 1985, p. 68). This therefore calls for transformational leaders who nurture and reinforce the culture of the school community by enhancing the bonding and interdependence between teachers. The growth of the school occurs through learning by all members who are aware of the norms, problems and solutions to the problems in the school. The building of school culture is done by school leadership and classroom teachers. Sergiovanni (1984) asserts that strong, functional cultures are "nurtured and built by the school leadership and membership" (p. 10). The school leadership however has a critical role of managing the culture so that the desired outcome in this case high performance is experienced.

According to Deal and Kennedy (1983), school leadership such as School Principals can help in building strong school culture by first getting to know the content of their school culture, then determine whether the culture is encouraging or undermining educational performance and finally plan how teachers will come to grips with cultural patterns that need to be changed. In addition, teacher professional development programs on school culture should be developed and be offered at all levels of teacher education and training to develop and improve their knowledge on school culture so that they can grow in it and engineer it to improve performance of students in national examinations.

Improvement-Effectiveness Approach on School Culture

A synthesis of literature on culture reveals that the concept of school culture has evolved from studies of organizational culture and school climate in the disciplines of organizational management and school administration (Cavanagh & Dellar, 1997a). Sergiovanni (1993) criticized researchers who viewed schools as formal organizations and used organizational models to describe schools for they also assumed typology-functionalism or process approaches. Sergiovanni suggested the application of sociological constructs to conceptualize schools. According to Sergiovanni (1993), a school should be viewed as *a learning community* with shared ideas, bonding between people and control being exercised through “norms, purposes, values, professional socialization, collegiality and natural interdependence,” (p.7). This conceptualization put school culture into an educational context rather than management context necessitating an alternative and most appropriate model to investigate, understand and describe school culture.

The improvement-effectiveness approach as a result emerged because “typology-functionalist approach and process approach are not sophisticated enough” (Tsang, 2009) to understand school culture and improve performance. The Improvement-effectiveness Approach which is grounded in effectiveness research identifies school culture as a critical component to maintain, achieve and improve school performance (Reezigt & Creemers, 2005; Bennett, 2001; Tsang, 2009). Here, school culture is made up of many interacting and interdependent cultural elements. It is diverse and dynamic in nature. Denison, Haaland and Goelzer (2004) observed that this approach recognizes that school culture can be functional (strong) or dysfunctional (weak). School principals can therefore use this approach to profile the culture of their schools and plan to improve the school culture itself and also promote academic performance of students.

Conceptualizing a school as a learning community, Cavanagh and Dellar (1996, 1997a, 2003) proposed *The School Improvement Model of School Culture*. This type of culture “is manifested, developed, maintained and transformed by the sharing of beliefs, values and norms amongst teachers resulting in commonality of purpose and actions intended to improve the learning of both students and teachers” (Cavanagh & Dellar 2003 p.199). This culture is also characterized by: improved educational outcomes, an emphasis on learning, mutual empowerment and caring, collaboration, partnerships, the social processes which develop, maintain and transform the culture, and the group and individual knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values, norms and behaviors (Cavanagh & Dellar, 2001a, 2001b).

Considering this conceptualization, school culture is inclined towards improving performance and can be used to explain what go on inside each secondary school in Kenya in relation to performance. Cavanagh and Dellar (1998) identify six cultural elements of this kind of school culture, including: “(1) *Professional values* concern the importance of the social institution of education and the need for school growth is grounded on pedagogical principles; (2) *An emphasis on learning* produces a learning community in which there is a commitment to professional growth and improved outcomes for students; (3) *Collegiality* empowers teachers to exercise professional judgments through the development of supportive inter-personal relationship; (4) *Collaboration* is interaction between teachers in which information is shared on school operational matters including the instructional program; (5) *Shared planning* is a collective process whereby a common vision of the school is actualized by logical planning; and (6) *Transformational leaders* share power and facilitate a school development process that engages the human potential and commitment of teachers,” (p.7).

The model assumes that “a strong school culture is evidenced by a high level of development of all the six elements,” (Cavanagh & Dellar, 1997a p.13). A school culture with well developed cultural elements is strong hence supportive to high performance. Given that “a culture with weak elements also has the potential for growth,” (Cavanagh & Dellar, 1997a p.15), deliberate stimulation of the weak elements to achieve an equilibrium must be put into action in order to develop and improve the culture of the school and as well improve the performance of students in national examination. Conceptualizing school culture in this way is supportive to school reforms and can provide the rationale for changing of schools towards better performance in national examinations in Kenya.

Measuring the Culture of a Learning Community

A study done by Coleman (1998) observed that partnerships between teachers, students, and parents are essential for the attainment of educational outcomes. Cavanagh and Dellar (2001a) noted that a learning community includes teachers, students, and parents. Because these three learning community groups influence the culture of the community and its expectations, a learning environment should comprise all these three learning community groups.

To measure a culture of a learning community, a number of data collection instruments need to be employed. In order to understand, evaluate and change a school's culture, Sergiovanni and Starratt (1993) note: "it needs first to be described," (p.95). Cavanagh and Dellar (1996, 1997b, 1998) developed the staff School Cultural Elements Questionnaire (SCEQ) to be used to collect views from teachers. The SCEQ comprises two forms - (1) the *actual form* that profiles teaching staffs' perceptions of the prevailing culture and (2) the *preferred form* that allows the staff to express the desired future state of the culture – and each form contains 42 items to measure the six element or components of school culture: professional values, emphasis on learning, collegiality, collaboration, shared planning, and transformational leadership.

It is however important to note that since school culture is primarily formed through teacher-student interactions, classroom culture is hence an intrinsic part of school culture (Peterson & Deal 2002). Another instrument, the Classroom Culture Elements Questionnaire (CCEQ) developed by Cavanagh, Dellar, Ellett and Rugutt, (2000) or a modification of the same should be used to collect views of students in the learning community building. Since research has long proved that parental involvement in a child's education is fundamental, views of parents as members of a learning community are consequently crucial. This can be achieved by utilizing the Parental Involvement in Schooling Questionnaire (PISQ) developed by Cavanagh and Dellar (2001a). The three instruments should be consulted and be analyzed complementarily in a triangle manner in order to fully understand, evaluate or describe the culture of a learning community in a particular school for purposes of improving the culture and performance of students in national examinations.

Applications of the School Improvement Model of School Culture in Kenya

In Kenya there is not much research applying this model. We therefore only present one study here that did apply this model. The one study was done by Cheng'oli (2012). The purpose of this study was to examine school culture and its influence on Kiswahili performance in selected secondary schools in West Pokot County, Kenya. The study described and

analyzed school culture in selected secondary schools that perform well and those that perform poorly. Performance of students in both high and low performing schools was described. The study also sought to show if there was any relationship between school culture and performance in Kiswahili KCSE national examinations.

Through studying four secondary schools; two high performing and two low performing, attention was paid to all the six cultural elements on the SCEQ and correlated to a five elements of questionnaire for students (a modification of CCEQ) to measure classroom culture. Results indicated that; in high performing schools there was a strong or functional culture that was characterized with well developed professional values and emphasis on learning without and equivalent development of other elements. In low performing schools where all the six elements were less developed, there existed a 'weak' or 'dysfunctional culture. The study also showed that there was a relationship between school culture and Kiswahili performance.

Although there is only one study related to School Improvement Model of School Culture in Kenya, this study still provide some evidences to support that this model and the SCEQ and CCEQ are useful in improving performance in Kenya. Though the findings may really represent the model of school culture, the study did not consider all three learning community members. More studies are needed to prove, modify or disapprove or even improve this model as away of promoting performance in Kenya.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above discussion, we provide some recommendations particularly to school principals, educational policy-makers and educational researchers. For the school Principals, they can improve performance of their schools' by first, profiling and identifying the structure of the culture of their schools with the SCEQ, CCEQ and PISQ. This will lay ground for a rational a decision-making framework for carrying out and testing performance improvement programs at school. They can also work out a deliberate plan with teachers in changing schools systemically through creating a strong school culture.

To policy-makers, we recommend that teacher education and training programs on school culture and performance should be introduced at all levels so that teachers are professionally empowered and developed so that they grow and at the sometime influence culture in schools in order to improve the culture and performance of students in national examinations.

For the educational researchers, because this model is relatively new in Kenya context, they should apply it in investigating school culture and performance in Kenya in order to understand its capacity in explaining and promoting performance in Kenya Certificate of Secondary Examinations national examinations.

CONCLUSION

Schools and educators have faced a lot of challenges and uncertainties due to the rapid and drastic educational reforms in Kenya as regards the current constitution. These challenges and uncertainties are expected to increase in this new era of performance based management (PBM) as well as performance contracting. School principals, educators and policy-makers must strive to maintain and improve performance in secondary schools in order to fit. The concept of school culture can offer a permanent solution to improved performance in national examinations secondary schools in Kenya. This article therefore, reviews and discusses the reengineering of school culture, present the improvement-effectiveness approach in order to improve school performance in national examinations. The School Improvement Model of School Culture and its application in Kenya are highlighted. Finally, the implications and recommendations to school Principals, policy-makers and educational researchers in Kenya are discussed in order to improve performance of school, teacher, and students in Kenya Certificate of Secondary Examination.

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